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Reflexivity, the role of history, and the case of mesmerism in early Victorian Britain

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Abstract

As part of a wider argument that history is essential to psychological understanding because of the reflexive nature of psychological knowledge, this article examines the case of mesmerism in early Victorian Britain as an example of how psychological knowledge is both constructive and constructed. It is argued that the shift from 'mesmerism' to 'hypnotism' was a change in understanding that created a new kind of psychological experience. It is also argued that demonstrations of mesmerism, far from being self-evident facts, could be framed as evidence either for or against the central claims of mesmerism. It is concluded that the case of mesmerism in early Victorian Britain provides a further example of the need for historical understanding within Psychology.

Keywords

Reflexivity, psychological knowledge, mesmerism, paranormal belief, psychical research, 19th century Britain

Author's note

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The reflexive nature of psychological knowledge is, it could be argued, the central reason why historical understanding is necessary to Psychology (e.g. Graumann & Gergen, 1996; Richards, 2002; Smith, 2007). However valuable or interesting history might be, its necessity for psychological understanding follows from the nature of psychological knowledge. In short, psychological knowledge is the product of people thinking and acting in a certain way (i.e. doing Psychology) according to a particular time and place and, in the process, shaping Psychology's subject matter in particular ways. What history shows is that, at different times and in different places, psychology has taken a variety of forms, and that in defining both what can be studied and how it should be studied, it has produced radically different versions of what we are (e.g. Danziger, 1990, 1997; Graumann & Gergen, 1996; Hacking, 1986, 1995a; Kusch, 1999; Richards, 2002; Smith, 1997, 2005, 2007). It is, therefore, essential to psychological understanding that we are aware of how psychological knowledge comes to be what it is, and how that in turn shapes our understanding of ourselves.

In discussing the reflexive nature of psychological knowledge, Smith (2007) has treated reflexivity as being concerned with two related points: first, since all knowledge claims rest on certain assumptions, there is no particular version of ourselves that is self-evidently true; second, since people are both subject and object of psychological knowledge, a change in one means a change in the other. This article considers these points in relation to a particular historical example of psychological knowledge, mesmerism. Mesmerism has been the subject of various historical studies, including histories of psychology. Traditionally treated as a 'pseudo-science', it has more recently been shown to be an important precursor to subsequent psychological understanding, and an excellent arena in which to explore broader matters relating to psychological discourse and scientific authority (e.g. Crabtree, 1993; Darnton, 1968; Ellenberger, 1970; Gauld, 1995; Lamont, in press; Leahey & Leahey, 1984; Quinn,

2007; Richards, 1992; Schmit, 2005; Winter, 1998). This article will consider mesmerism in early Victorian Britain as an example of how psychological knowledge has been both constructed by, and constructive of, people in particular contexts. Before doing so, however, it might be worth making some preliminary comments, based upon the work of, among others, Ian Hacking, Graham Richards and Roger Smith, relating to the reflexive nature of psychological knowledge and the implications of this for the role of history in psychology.

Psychological knowledge and the role of history

Psychological knowledge is both constructed and constructive. It is produced by people in particular ways within particular contexts, and it can change how people think, feel and behave. For example, it is the explicit purpose of much of clinical psychology as well as other areas of applied psychology, a purpose defined by people according to a particular social context, to change people through changing their knowledge and understanding of themselves. Indeed, the psychological knowledge that has been ‘applied’ over the decades has itself changed significantly, driven by changes in the wider historical context, and this has transformed psychologists’ own understandings and practices (which have, in turn, changed the manner in which their patients or clients have been changed as a result of such practices). In fairly straightforward ways, then, changes in psychological knowledge, shaped by particular historical contexts, have produced changes in psychological reality.

However, psychological knowledge also plays a wider role in the construction of psychological reality. Psychology, after all, defines its subject matter. Psychologists decide what is of interest by identifying relevant psychological categories and ways of studying

them and, in doing so, shape how we understand ourselves. Thus, for example, when Watson defined Psychology as the study of behavior, he provided a radically different way of understanding what we are from that provided via introspective methods. It was argued, of course, that this understanding was too narrow and that we are, in fact, more than organisms who respond to stimuli. Both Watson's approach and the arguments of his critics were themselves shaped by wider concerns about the status and relevance of Psychology as a discipline. Nevertheless, the success of the critics led to a significant change in how psychological research was carried out, and the new forms of psychological knowledge that followed, directed towards a quite different subject matter, defined us in a radically different way (i.e. primarily as cognitive beings). Since any given version of psychological knowledge provides a particular version of psychological reality, a change in the former will naturally result in a change in the latter. However, the reflexive argument suggests that this is not merely a matter of studying different aspects of ourselves; it suggests that a change in psychological knowledge changes not only our understanding but also, in the process, our own psychological reality (e.g. Hacking, 1986; Richards, 1992, 2002; Smith, 2005, 2007).

In deciding what counts as psychological knowledge, psychologists not only define their subject matter but also, in doing so, define what we are as psychological beings.

Psychological language, the categories, theories and metaphors that psychologists employ, define what we consist of and place the various components in a particular relationship. Thus, a change in psychological language amounts to a change in how we define what we are at a fundamental level. For example, whereas once we had passions and affections, now we have emotions, once we had character, now we have personality, and these psychological categories, though similar, are not the same thing (e.g. Danziger, 1997; Dixon, 2003; Richards, 2002; Smith, 2005). This, so far, might be seen as an epistemological argument,

about knowledge of ourselves rather than our ‘actual’ selves. However, since language is necessary for understanding – indeed, there is no meaningful experience without language - it is, in practice, impossible to distinguish between psychological reality and particular descriptions of it. This is not to say that there is nothing beyond language, but rather that, whatever it might be, we cannot say anything about it (or meaningfully experience it) without employing particular psychological language (e.g. Leary, 1994; Richards, 1992, 2002; Smith, 2007). It is in the sense that a form of description is necessary in order for us to have a meaningful psychological experience, whatever the physiological reality, that our understanding of ourselves amounts to our psychological reality.

There are, of course, some kinds of psychological phenomena for which this seems more obvious than others. For example, it is hard to imagine having a belief without possessing an adequate language to describe it, but no doubt easier to see memory as something that is independent of language. Nevertheless, it remains the case that we cannot make sense of any psychological phenomenon without some sort of description, and that whatever psychological phenomenon of which we attempt to make sense is defined by the language we use. The current psychological definition of memory (including, of course, its various kinds) is a particular form of description, based on a wider metaphor for psychological reality, and one that is not self-evident but rather the product of the computer age. Just as to treat memory as psychological (rather than, say, physical or social) is one option, so is the particular psychological version we have today, and it is clearly shaped by broader views about the nature of mind, current technology and so on (e.g. Collins, 2001; Danziger, 2008; Richards, 2002). Whatever its correspondence to the reality of remembering, one could not think of one’s past experience in such terms until fairly recently (cf. Hacking, 1995a; Richards, 2002; Young, 1995). After all, no Victorian had a short term memory as far as they were concerned.

In hindsight, of course, one might say that they did but simply did not know it, and this would be accurate according to current psychological knowledge, but it would not be an accurate way of remembering the past.

It is precisely this question of whether historians of psychology should attempt to understand their subject according to either current or contemporaneous knowledge that is at the heart of the presentist-historicist debate. There is, of course, no correct approach, but the choice is important both in terms of how we understand present knowledge and in terms of the place of history within the discipline of Psychology. Some of us wish to argue that history is essential to psychological understanding, and that this is because we (as psychologists) are constantly in the business of constructing and reconstructing how we understand ourselves (as people). Indeed, the strength of the former argument can be seen to depend upon the extent to which the latter can be said to be the case, for if we can show that psychological knowledge is both constructed and constructive in a deep sense, that it is both shaped by non-empirical criteria and affects its own subject matter in fundamental ways, then the need for historical understanding should be that much more obvious. As some of the historical studies cited above have provided empirical support for this argument by considering specific cases, so this article seeks to examine mesmerism in early Victorian Britain as an example of the constructed and constructive nature of psychological knowledge.

Mesmerism and the constructive powers of psychological knowledge

Knowledge relating to mesmerism can be seen to have transformed psychological phenomena in a number of ways. In the most obvious sense, application of such knowledge provided

striking illustrations of how significant changes in individual thoughts, feelings and behaviour could be brought about. Moreover, such demonstrations also affected the attitudes of the wider public. After all, they were not only displays of psychological change but were also illustrations of psychological traits deemed characteristic of certain social groups. In 1840's Britain, for example, demonstrations of power over the minds of various subjects could be treated as evidence of the inherent mental inferiority of women, children, the working class or the Irish (Winter, 1998). More generally, they were illustrations of the powers of the human mind, and changed how people thought about themselves. The wider influence of mesmerism was in how it shaped views about what the mind was and what it could do, particularly in its power to change people. As a precursor to psychotherapy and practical psychology, knowledge of mesmerism was knowledge of how to transform human beings in fundamental ways.

Indeed, for all the disputes over the validity of mesmerism, that it involved some kind of psychological change was largely accepted. After all, the 1784 Paris Commission, in its dismissal of the theory of animal magnetism, had explained observable changes in the behaviour of subjects as the product of their imagination, and the English translation of the report had noted that this reframed mesmerism as a mental rather than a physical phenomenon (Richards, 1992, 287). Indeed, the imagination theory was one that James Braid sought to refute in the 1840's. The disputes, however, were complicated by the variety of phenomena associated with mesmerism. On the one hand, Braid's medical contemporaries largely rejected mesmerism on the grounds that observable changes in behaviour were not the result of a trance state induced by a magnetic fluid, and that more extravagant phenomena, such as cures, insensibility to pain, and lucid somnambulism (clairvoyance) were simply not real. On the other hand, the variety of phenomena provoked a variety of interpretations, and

so however much the discourse was primarily one of accepting or rejecting mesmerism as a whole, there were many who, like Braid, accepted some phenomena but rejected such things as lucid somnambulism.

Nevertheless, disputes over the validity of various mesmeric phenomena were regularly disputes over the mental condition of subjects. When subjects displayed overt changes in behaviour, medical critics maintained they were not in a trance state. When patients reported feeling no pain during surgery, critics maintained that their testimony was unreliable and that they did, in fact, feel pain. And when Harriet Martineau (the well-known writer) claimed in 1844 that she had been cured by mesmeric treatment, critics dismissed her as hysterical (Winter, 1998). Such was their psychological reality according to orthodox scientific knowledge in early Victorian Britain, at precisely the time Braid first proposed his theory of neurypnology. As his theory gained acceptance, however, an alternative scientific view came to be established. According to this new scientific knowledge, the mental condition of subjects was quite different: subjects were in a trance state after all; surgical patients did not feel pain; and Harriet Martineau was no longer hysterical.

Of course, such a change in understanding was neither immediate nor universal, and was only one of several changes in the theory and practice of those who came after Mesmer. Indeed, Braid's historical significance may have been exaggerated, not least in those psychology textbooks that have presented him as the champion of science over pseudo-science.

Nevertheless, Braid's theory and the new terminology he employed, much of which has continued to be used, was an explicit attempt to distinguish between his view and previous ones (Braid, 1843). And it is clear that many of his contemporaries recognised his view as a distinct departure from that of both the mesmerists and the sceptics. On the one hand, he

provoked the hostility of both John Elliotson, founding editor of the *Zoist*, and Thomas Wakley, founding editor of the *Lancet* (Gauld, 1995, 287). On the other hand, some previously sceptical medics began to distinguish between animal magnetism and hypnotism, as the latter was seen to provide a more plausible theory according to contemporary medical thinking. As one letter to *Medical Times* put it, Braid had shown that ‘many of the marvels of mesmerism are capable of rational explanation’ (‘S’, 1844).

The shift in thinking that Braid’s theory represented involved a change not only in how certain psychological phenomena were described and understood, but also in the experience of those being understood in this way. In one sense, to view these phenomena according to Braid’s theory was to observe a quite different psychological reality, and observations according to this new understanding would, of course, inform psychological theory and practice (which would, in turn, shape how others thought, felt and behaved in a variety of ways). However, as Hacking (e.g. 1995b) has argued, the interaction between psychological categories and the categorised leads not only to new categories and practices but also to new ways of being. What ‘hypnosis’ provided was not only a new way of understanding psychological phenomena that would shape new practices but was also a new way of being. After all, according to Braid, the mental state of his subjects was due neither to the will of another nor to their own imagination, but rather was the result of intense concentration of attention on their part. It required the consent of the subject, indeed it could easily be self-induced, and did not require the person who ‘put’ them in the state to arouse them from it (Braid, 1843). The hypnotic experience itself, therefore, depended upon the subject understanding what was going on in a quite different way from someone who was being mesmerized. Indeed, William Gregory distinguished between the two processes in terms not only of the induction process, but also the character of the sleep produced and the kinds of

phenomena that might occur (Gregory, 1851). In short, the experience of the hypnotized subject was different from that of the mesmerized subject.

Clearly, the hypnotic experience shared certain features with the experience of being mesmerized, but it was the same for neither facilitator nor subject. Hypnosis amounted to a new psychological reality, in the same sense that Multiple Personality Disorder and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder shared certain features with, but were not the same as, previously understood psychological conditions, and which in turn produced not only new understandings but also different kinds of experience for those who were treated, and who understood their conditions, according to these categories rather than previously available ones (Hacking, 1995a; Young, 1995). In the same sense that ‘nobody prior to Freud had an Oedipus Complex, that nobody before Pavlov and Watson was ‘conditioned’ and that nobody before about 1914 had a ‘high IQ’ (Richards, 2002), nobody prior to Braid was ‘hypnotised’. This new psychological concept made available a new way of talking about and understanding a kind of psychological experience, and without that concept one could not discuss, observe or even experience ‘hypnosis’. In hindsight, one might wish to say that mesmerised subjects were, in fact, hypnotised, but neither those subjects nor anyone observing or discussing them had that form of understanding available to them prior to Braid. There was, for those people, no such thing as hypnosis for anyone to discuss, observe or experience.

Whether one accepts this fully may depend upon whether one chooses a historicist rather than a presentist view of history and, in doing so, declines to overrule the figures of the past on the basis that more recent knowledge is correct. But this choice, of course, depends on one’s view of the purpose of history. If one is in the business of identifying precursors to current

knowledge, a valuable endeavour in itself, then a presentist view is, in some sense at least, unavoidable. However, if one views the history of psychology as a means of understanding the nature of psychological knowledge, then a historicist view is essential. According to the former position, knowledge about 'hypnosis' can be seen as a new and better way of understanding a kind of psychological reality that already existed. According to the latter view, however, such a psychological reality could not meaningfully exist without an adequate language to describe it. Both of these are epistemological arguments in the sense that they refer to understanding of something that was, at a physiological level, fairly similar (though, since the processes of induction and arousal were different, could not have been identical). In the latter case, however, one is questioning whether a psychological reality can be said to exist without a means to describe it. To say that people were (essentially) hypnotised prior to the existence of a theory of hypnosis is to describe the past in a way that contemporaries could not have understood, and to do so on the basis that our current view is correct (for any historical period). To see mesmerized subjects as hypnotised subjects is to ignore both how people understood themselves, and the argument that their own psychological reality depended upon ways of thinking that were available to them.

The practical significance of this is that it prevents us from fully taking on board particular and, some would argue, the most important lessons in the history of psychology, i.e. that psychological knowledge is always based upon certain assumptions at any given time, and that changes in knowledge of ourselves have changed us in significant ways. It has been argued here that when Victorians framed such experiences as hypnotic rather than mesmeric, this was more than a new way of understanding the same experience. Whatever the physiological reality, hypnosis was, in effect, a new kind of psychological reality, since one could not meaningfully experience what one had no way of understanding. The significant

point, of course, is not that they were right according to their own knowledge (any more than we are right according to present knowledge), but rather that we are always in the position of relying upon current understanding in order to make sense of psychological experience, and that there is no way to convey a distinction between our experiences and our understanding of them.

Braid's hypnosis, then, was a new form of psychological knowledge and practice that brought into being a new experience, that of being hypnotised, which was different from being mesmerized at least in terms of the process of induction and the subject's understanding of the hypnotic state (and, if one accepts Gregory's view, in terms of the character of the state itself). Braid's theory, of course, was the result of observation and experiment with many subjects, but it was initially prompted by a public demonstration of mesmeric phenomena by an itinerant mesmerist (Gauld, 1995, 281). While countless others had witnessed similar demonstrations, the kernel of Braid's new theory was based upon an alternative interpretation of observed behaviour. In short, he saw the same facts in a different way. That such facts did not themselves necessitate a particular theory was not only the case in relatively mundane mesmeric demonstrations. Indeed, as we shall see, the most controversial and challenging phenomena were also open to radically different interpretations.

The construction of the facts of mesmerism

The variety of phenomena associated with mesmerism could provoke a variety of explanations. While observable changes in behaviour could be attributed to the subject's imagination, demonstrations of mesmeric analgesia or lucid somnambulism could not. When

one saw public lectures on mesmerism in early 1840's Britain, many of which included demonstrations of insensibility to pain and clairvoyance, one had the choice of viewing these either as illustrations of the effect of a magnetic fluid upon the physiology of the subject or else as fraudulent. If a sceptical medic was challenged by an apparently genuine case of analgesia in a female subject, he might dismiss it as a case of hysteria, though this seems to have been little more than a way of avoiding concession to the reality of the phenomena (e.g. Anon, 1844a). Cases of ostensible clairvoyance, on the other hand, were more clear cut: either they were genuine or else they were the result of deliberate deception. The importance of framing such demonstrations as one or the other was fundamental to the debate about mesmerism, despite the variety of phenomena, since the ease with which all of them could be grouped together meant that the dispute about the validity of mesmerism was regularly a dispute about whether such demonstrations were real or fraudulent.

The fundamental importance of such public demonstrations to the dispute over the validity of mesmerism was recognised at the time. On the one hand, demonstrations of mesmeric phenomena, like similar demonstrations of chemical phenomena (e.g. Morus, 2006), had significantly more power to convince than mere talk. For example, when John Elliotson compared lectures on phrenology with the then new demonstrations of phreno-mesmerism, he noted that, 'where formerly *one* had been converted to the truth of phrenology, now, through mesmerism, *one hundred* were converted' (Cooter, 1984, 150). On the other hand, their demonstrative power posed a particularly direct challenge to medical authority.

Demonstrations of insensibility to pain were observable evidence that mesmerism worked as an analgesic, and displays of lucid somnambulism suggested that mesmerism might be used to diagnose illness. Both these claims were explicitly made by mesmeric lecturers, who also provided these services to the public. Indeed, even those medics who became interested in

mesmerism, in spite of initial scepticism, did so as a result of witnessing such demonstrations and by coming to the conclusion that observed facts demanded investigation in a way that reported facts did not (Cooter, 1984; Gauld, 1995; Winter, 1998). Throughout all of this, it was the ability to show rather than merely tell, to demonstrate facts that were observable to anyone, regardless of theoretical inclination, that both attracted interest and provoked hostility among scientists and the wider public. For both sides of the dispute, it was directly observable facts that would determine the outcome.

Yet even in the early Victorian period, facts did not speak for themselves. Whatever the power of demonstration, any demonstration requires discursive work in order for it to be treated as a demonstration of something (e.g. Lamont, 2006; Potter, 1996). Thus, while proponents would claim that such demonstrations were facts, and critics would reject them as fraudulent, this was not simply the case of different sides citing different facts. Rather, each side could frame the same fact as evidence of either the reality or the fraudulent nature of mesmerism. Indeed, as we shall see, even demonstrations of the most controversial of mesmeric phenomena, clairvoyance, whether successful or not, could be framed as evidence either for or against the reality of mesmerism. In this sense, the dispute about mesmerism was not about the facts of observed phenomena but rather about how such demonstrations were discursively constructed as facts of one sort rather than another. By examining these arguments, we can see that mesmerism is also an exemplary case of how psychological observation is always based upon certain assumptions and, therefore, open to radically different interpretations.

Framing a failed demonstration of mesmeric clairvoyance

One minor but revealing episode occurred in 1843, when W. H. Weekes, a surgeon from Kent (a county in the south east of England), claimed he had discovered a subject who could demonstrate lucid somnambulism. A sceptical medic, one Dr Smethurst, went to witness a demonstration in which the subject, a boy, was blindfolded then attempted to identify objects that were placed before him. According to Smethurst's account (Smethurst, 1843), controls against fraud were inadequate, and the boy was able to peek beneath the blindfold. At one point, he recalled, 'the delusion was unmasked, for I particularly noticed that everything to be distinguished by the boy was invariably placed before the light, just under his nose, so that he could not fail of seeing them in that position' (p. 146). Smethurst interrupted the demonstration to suggest a more stringent test, at which point the boy became anxious and cried out in terror. Weekes then ended the demonstration, told Smethurst that he had 'alarmed the boy by speaking', which was contrary to the rules of the society, and announced that the meeting was dissolved. When Smethurst's requests for a further test were not accepted, he 'then, without the slightest hesitation, denounced the boy [as] an impostor' (p. 146). Smethurst's conclusion, which was subsequently described in a letter to *Medical Times*, noted that mesmerism, 'invariably, when properly investigated, terminated in an exposure of their nefarious and barefaced attempts to impose upon the credulity of the weak-minded' (p. 146). Thus, though Smethurst's theory about how the boy was cheating amounted to no more than a suspicion (according to his own account), the failure to adopt more stringent controls was presented as proof that mesmerism was a fraud.

Smethurst's letter to *Medical Times* provoked a response from Weekes, who presented the events in a quite different manner (Weekes, 1843). Though he disputed certain details, he did not deny that the test in question had been a failure, but rather denied that this was evidence

of fraud. On the contrary, he presented the boy as an example of ‘a genuine and beautiful instance of clairvoyance or lucid somnambulism’ (p. 322). Weekes’ reframing of the incident as evidence of the reality of clairvoyance involved two key elements. First, it was presented as merely failure on this occasion by citing prior successful tests of a similar kind. The validity of these tests was, in turn, warranted by an appeal to the stringency of the conditions, the scientific expertise of others who had witnessed them, and to Weekes’ own experience of having been ‘upwards of thirty years disinterestedly engaged in promoting the objects of free and unprejudiced inquiry and scientific truth’ (p. 322). Second, this particular failure was attributed to Smethurst’s interruption, by noting that he ‘did not remain silent, *agreeably to the conditions at starting*’, and adding that had he remained silent, he would have seen experiments ‘which, I think, must have put aside the most inveterate of your doubts’. (p. 322). By describing the incident as one failure among countless successful trials, and as the result of conditions that were known (by those who had studied the subject) to be unfavourable, Weekes’ account of the same incident was constructed as evidence for the reality of clairvoyance.

A similar incident was reported a few months later, when the well known mesmerist, W. J. Vernon, gave a lecture at Southwark Literary Institution in south east London, and several members of the London Medical Society made a point of attending. As Vernon prepared to demonstrate clairvoyant reading with several young female subjects, a medical gentleman produced a ‘full face mask’ that was lined with black velvet, and ‘so contrived as to render vision impossible’. Vernon ‘at first objected to its use, as the mask would render the face very hot; the slit for the mouth was very small, and there would not be a sufficient degree of lucidity’. However, he agreed for it to be tried on several girls, and the result was that they ‘were utterly unable to read’. Vernon explained the failure ‘by attributing it to want of

sufficient lucidity'. The failure was discussed a few days later at the London Medical Society, where one medic 'looked upon these exhibitions as utter deceptions' and another, who admitted to having attended deliberately in order to expose the deception, 'considered Vernon to be a thorough impostor, and one who ought to be exposed.' This discussion was also published in *Medical Times*, and was reprinted in other medical journals (Anon, 1844b).

Like Weekes before him, Vernon wrote a letter to the journal, appealing to his right to reply to personal accusations of dishonesty (Vernon, 1844). Admitting that the experiments had indeed ended in failure, he asked: 'is it sufficient to justify medical gentlemen in imputing to me a desire to impose upon the public? Is it not a notorious fact that scientific experiments, which are universally allowed to be true, often fail in consequence of attendant circumstance?' (p. 94). He then, like Weekes, described several similar experiments that had been conducted previously, in which he stressed the stringency of conditions and the medical credentials of the witnesses, such that two medical gentlemen had declared 'that clairvoyance is a fact they can no longer resist', and another had gone from being 'one of my strongest opponents' to one who 'expressed his firm conviction of the truth of clairvoyance' (p. 95). Vernon also framed this particular failure as the result of conditions that he had expected to be unfavourable, pointing out that he had 'stated at the time that the mask might so far interfere as to prevent the manifestation of the faculty, but did not object to the experiment being tried' (p. 95). Thus, while critics might frame individual failures as exposures of the fallacy of mesmerism, proponents could reframe them as one among many successes, and as the expected outcomes of particular conditions that were expected to be unfavourable to the phenomena, thereby constructing an account of failure as evidence for the reality of the phenomena in general.

Indeed, the description of such phenomena as prone to failure in certain conditions would have made perfect sense to many. As Vernon himself argued, that certain experiments sometimes failed in certain conditions was quite compatible with scientific work.

Furthermore, failure could actually reinforce the view that such phenomena were not the result of trickery. After all, the alternative explanation for feats of this sort was some form of collusion between mesmerist and subject, a method that logically would work every time.

That this was the case was reinforced by contemporary performers of very similar demonstrations of blindfolded vision, who relied upon codes to communicate information and framed what they did as entertainment. These performers, who will be discussed below, were often reported as never failing. Whatever observers may have known about how such feats might be done, therefore, the occasional failure was something that did not fit with the attribution of trickery, and did not look like contemporary performances that were more generally assumed to be trickery. Thus, for some, failure could be seen as evidence that what they were watching was not a trick. For example, when one observer of a mesmeric clairvoyant reported that the subject failed on occasion, he stated that '[t]hose exceptions to his general accuracy were, however, to me proofs of the absence of all collusion (A Lover of Truth, 1844). Such an argument was by no means unique, and proponents of psychic phenomena would continue to argue that the occasional failures of mediums and psychic claimants demonstrated that they were not employing trickery (e.g. Lamont, 2006).

Framing a successful demonstration of mesmeric clairvoyance

As accounts of a failed demonstration could be constructed as evidence in favour of the reality of mesmerism, so could successful demonstrations be framed as evidence that the

phenomena were merely trickery. At the same time as the proponents of mesmeric clairvoyance were demonstrating the ability of subjects to see whilst blindfolded, others were entertaining the public with very similar performances. These performers were also blindfolded, and demonstrated the ability to see objects and read without normal vision. Furthermore, it was by no means self-evident that they were performing mere trickery. Louis M’Kean, for example, was billed as possessing a faculty that ‘has defied the research of all the Medical men, by whom he has been seen’ (Houdini, 1908, 212), and the *Morning Chronicle* noted that there ‘can be no doubt that the answers proceed from the boy. By what means he is enabled to give them is a mystery ... If all these feats are genuine the lad is equally a prodigy for knowledge and discrimination’ (cited in Anon, 1831). A few years later, and at the same time that W. J. Vernon was claiming to demonstrate genuine clairvoyance, the ‘Mysterious Lady’ was performing very similar effects to Louis M’Kean, describing ‘minutely objects which are placed in such a situation as to render it wholly out of her power to see any portion of them’ (Christopher, 1962, p. 63). Indeed, there is clear evidence that some spectators did indeed attribute her abilities to mesmerism (e.g. Lee, 1866, p. 122; Paris, 1853, p. 435).

Nevertheless, her performances were billed in the contemporary language of rational recreation, being ‘interesting, surprising and instructive’ (Christopher, 1962, p. 63), and the show included ‘some sleight of hand tricks, performed with dexterity, and was written up in the ‘Entertainments’ section of newspapers (‘Mysterious Lady’, 1845a). Indeed, she was sometimes advertised in direct competition to those who claimed to do it for real. In March, as Vernon was publicising his demonstrations of ‘Mesmerism and Clairvoyance’, the Mysterious Lady was advertising (on the same front page of the same newspaper) her performances, which threw ‘completely into the shade the wonders of Mesmerism and

Clairvoyance' ('Mysterious Lady', 1845b). Furthermore, medical critics of mesmerism encouraged others to witness such performances on the grounds that they were just as impressive as the feats of mesmeric clairvoyants (An Enquirer, 1845). Thus, whilst such performances were not self-evidently trickery, and precious few seem to have been able to discover how they were done, they were nevertheless framed by both performers and medical critics of mesmerism as evidence that the real thing was not real at all.

What is significant here is that so far as they were framed as evidence that mesmeric clairvoyance was fraudulent, this was not on the basis of observable evidence. Neither M'Kean nor the Mysterious Lady ever showed or explained how they could see whilst blindfolded, nor did they ever explicitly state that what they did was trickery. They may have framed what they did as entertainment, described it as superior to 'the wonders of Mesmerism', and been viewed by certain critics of mesmerism as demonstrable proof that such feats were the result of trickery, but it is clear that some observers at least were not at all clear on this point. Thus, successful demonstrations of feats very similar to those in which Vernon and other mesmerists engaged could be framed as proof either for or against the validity of mesmerism solely on the basis of how individuals interpreted what they observed.

Another form of demonstration that not only resembled but also explicitly sought to duplicate the feats of mesmeric clairvoyance were those of the anti-mesmerists. J. Q. Rumball, for example, gave lectures on the fallacies of mesmerism that included demonstrations of mesmeric phenomena. Both the lectures and demonstrations were explicitly targeted at those given by W. J. Vernon and other mesmeric performers, often being held in the same venue shortly afterwards. In Bristol, he provided a demonstration of a boy being able to read whilst his eyes had been covered, claiming that this was identical to demonstrations of mesmeric

clairvoyance but that, in this case, it was done by trickery. ‘We were not present’ reported the *Bristol Mercury*, ‘but have been informed that the lecturer exhibited, by means of his pupils, all the phenomena said to attach to mesmerism, and which were avowedly effected by collusion, but the operation of which was beyond the discovery of his audience’ (‘Anti-mesmerism’, 1845). The audience, not being provided with any explanation of how the feats were done, were simply expected to view the demonstrations as fraudulent because the demonstrator said so. Thus, what was clearly observable as a successful demonstration of mesmeric clairvoyance could equally be framed as evidence that mesmerism was a fallacy.

What was the case for the most controversial of mesmeric phenomena was, of course, also the case for other phenomena. As noted above, observations of striking changes in behaviour, or of insensibility to pain, could be framed as evidence either for or against mesmerism as a whole, depending upon the viewpoint of the observer. In short, the facts did not speak for themselves, and demonstrations of mesmerism, like other demonstrations, could be framed in radically different ways. While the demonstrations were often discussed as a more direct and convincing form of evidence, the observable facts did not themselves support one view rather than another. Rather, it was the interpretations favoured by observers that determined whether they were evidence either for or against mesmerism.

Precisely why individuals might favour one interpretation over another is, of course, another and somewhat complex matter, though certain points may be worth making. First, proponents of the phenomena, such as Vernon and Weeks, though they invariably claimed that they had begun as sceptics, were nevertheless (at the time of the demonstrations described) in the business of displaying the phenomena as genuine. Conversely, critics such as Smethurst and the members of the London Medical Society had gone out of their way to view the

demonstrations they saw as part of a sceptical enquiry into mesmerism. It is therefore easy to see their interpretations as following naturally from their assumptions prior to observation.

Second, while it may have been neither self-evident nor explicitly stated that the demonstrations of M’Kean and the Mysterious Lady were a form of trickery, there were nevertheless contextual cues (such as venue, publicity material and the style of performance) that no doubt led the majority to this conclusion. And, in the case of Rumball’s duplications of mesmeric phenomena, there was the explicit assurance of the performer himself that this was the case, even if such assurances were not accepted by everyone (cf. Lamont, 2006).

Third, that individuals could disagree about the meaning of observed mesmeric phenomena should not be so surprising. Disagreements among observers were part and parcel of the disputes over phrenology (e.g. Shapin, 1979) and spiritualism (e.g. Lamont, 2006), and scientific observations have continued to be open to radically different interpretations (e.g. Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984). Indeed, what all of these disputes illustrate is that different accounts of observations can be consistent with the observed facts and yet support contradictory assumptions.

Discussion

Psychological knowledge has both defined how we should understand ourselves, and been practically deployed with a view to changing people. The deployment and dissemination of psychological knowledge can be seen to have changed its subject matter not only in the sense that it has focussed on different aspects of ourselves but also in the sense that people’s thoughts, feelings and behaviour can be transformed by new knowledge and new experiences. There is another sense, however, in which it can be argued that changes in

psychological language have been changes in how we think about how we think, feel and behave, and this itself can be seen as a change in what we are as thinking, feeling and behaving beings. The shift from 'mesmerism' to 'hypnotism' was not simply a different way of describing the same psychological reality but rather was a new form of knowledge and practice that created a new kind of experience. It is, then, an illustrative case of the constructive nature of psychological knowledge in that it illustrates not only how the way in which we think about ourselves can shape how we think, feel and behave, but also how available psychological knowledge shapes our psychological reality.

Psychological knowledge is not only constructive but also constructed. This is necessary because it is always based on certain assumptions. There are no self-evident facts about psychological phenomena, only evidence that requires discursive work for it to exist as evidence of something. What the history of mesmerism shows is that even the most directly observable facts were capable of being constructed as evidence either for or against the central claim that was being demonstrated. It might be argued, of course, that the demonstrations cited were public exhibitions rather than scientific experiments but this, too, was part of the construction process. Such demonstrations were invariably presented as scientific tests by either proponents or critics of mesmerism depending upon the circumstances. When they failed, mesmerists could attribute this to the lack of proper scientific conditions (such as inappropriate interference by narrow-minded sceptics), and critics could attribute this to the presence of proper scientific conditions (such as adequate controls). When they succeeded, mesmerists could attribute this to the presence of proper scientific conditions (such as calm and open-minded investigation) whilst critics could attribute this to the lack of proper scientific conditions (such as the lack of appropriate expertise and adequate controls) (Lamont, 2008).

Mesmerism, therefore, provides a clear reminder that changes in psychological knowledge can result in changes in psychological reality, and that psychological ‘facts’ are always based upon certain assumptions. It also illustrates how disputes over how to interpret the facts were bound up with wider moral and social concerns. After all, proponents presented the analgesic and diagnostic properties of mesmerism as a benefit to humankind, whilst critics presented its rejection as part of an ongoing fight against irrationality and the exploitation of the credulous (Lamont, *in press*). At the same time, proponents of mesmerism sought to challenge orthodox medical practices and promote more democratic knowledge, whilst senior representatives of the medical profession went out of their way to debunk not only the validity of mesmerism but also the expertise of its proponents (Winter, 1998). Such disputes over the validity of knowledge and expertise serve as a reminder that psychological knowledge and practices are by no means merely passively accepted but can be contested, and such contests can themselves lead to changes in subsequent knowledge and practice (e.g. Hacking, 1995b).

That mesmerism has often been treated either as a pseudo-science or as an inherently flawed precursor to superior psychological knowledge is a reminder of the limits of a presentist approach to history. The disputes over mesmerism were not simply a process through which scientific knowledge overcame erroneous beliefs. Mesmeric demonstrations were always open to alternative interpretations, and the rejection of the validity of mesmerism was not a natural conclusion based upon observable evidence. Furthermore, many critics of mesmerism, like many critics of phrenology, based some of their theoretical criticisms on grounds that few psychologists today would accept as valid (e.g. Leahey & Leahey, 1984). Nor is it sufficient to see mesmerism as a case of a partial understanding giving way to a fuller understanding. After all, whilst it is easy to think that we know better now, what

hypnosis amounted to was an additional interpretation of the same 'facts', one that was itself disputed, and which has continued to be disputed ever since.

Only by examining the topic in terms that contemporaries would have understood can we understand what amounted to their psychological reality. Only by doing so can we fully appreciate that our own psychological reality is similarly shaped by the terms that are currently available to us in this particular historical context, and which themselves are always disputable. Psychology might benefit from a history that stresses its achievements, and indulge a history that provides information of antiquarian interest, but it requires a history that critically examines how psychological knowledge has been constructed in particular ways and has, in the process, shaped the very subject matter it seeks to describe. Only with the hindsight of historical knowledge can we see that, and in what ways, this has been the case.

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